

Published by:  
Department of Conservation,  
P.O. Box 5086, Wellington.  
March 2001.

# Wonderful *Whale-ington*



A 16-metre southern right whale checked out Wellington Harbour in 1997. Photo: The New Zealand Herald.

Before whaling took its toll, southern right whales bred in Wellington harbour. Their cavorting was so loud a visitor in the 1800s complained the whales kept him awake all night.

Today when a whale surfaces in these waters most watchers are spellbound. Motorists get caught in major traffic jams on the motorway when the tall fins of orca slice through the harbour waves. Seaside coffee sippers and kayakers are entertained when hundreds of dolphins regularly parade into town.

Whales and dolphins excite the emotions and imagination of

people. Wellington, with its sheltered inner harbour and outer rough and raw coastline, is lucky to live on the edge of their world. Keep your eye out for these show-stopping neighbours.

## ***The Cook Strait takeaway bar***

*Whales swam down two separate evolutionary streams—one grew teeth, the other developed huge baleen sieves through which to strain their tiny food, planktonic krill, from the water.*

The waters around Wellington do not hold permanent whale populations, but there is something to offer both toothed and baleen whales that pass through each year. Toothed whales include dolphins, porpoises, orca, sperm and beaked whales. Baleen whales include some of the biggest—southern right, humpback and blue whales.

Deep Cook Strait canyons and food-bearing currents provide a rich larder, and Wellington harbour, shallow by comparison, offers a chance for rest and relaxation in warmer waters.

Not far from the outer coast the sea floor drops to canyons more than 1000 metres deep. In the dark crevices live squid, a favourite food of deep-diving toothed sperm whales.

For baleen whales, Cook Strait provides a rich 'soup' of fish and tiny animals that can be sieved from the ocean through their giant baleen plates. The soup is mixed by currents swirling through the canyons and over reefs, stimulating the growth of tiny planktonic plants and attracting zooplankton, which in turn are eaten by fish.



Department of Conservation  
*Te Papa Atawhai*

## ***Which Whales are found around Wellington?***

Twenty-three whale species have been seen passing through Wellington's waters, though some are very rare and only join the record books when they strand or wash up on shore.

### **Common visitors**

Our most frequent Wellington visitors are dolphins—the common dolphin and orca. Both can be spotted all year round, but are most likely seen between February and April.

#### *Common dolphin*

Playful pods of common dolphins are regular visitors to Wellington. Hundreds and sometimes thousands can chop the harbour waves or leap along the coast. Usually less than two-metres long, the common dolphin can be recognised from its colour, distinctive beak and low, smoothly sloping head. Animals are dark grey or purplish-black on top, and white and cream below.

Watch out for them as they surface to breathe. Unlike us their breathing is not unconscious. They can sleep only by resting one side of their brain at a time.



Common dolphin.  
Photo: The Evening Post.



Orca.

#### *Orca (Killer whale)*

Pods of orca, power into Wellington for a pit stop of their favourite meal. They like to dig the muddy sea bottom for stingrays and there is a good supply of these in the shallow basin of Wellington Harbour. They also eat seals and dolphins.

An estimated 150 to 200 orcas make regular laps around New Zealand, moving between the north of the North Island and Kaikoura in the south.

Common behaviour—the sort that brings Hutt motorway traffic to a standstill—is spy hopping (a tail-stand and 360 degree turn), breaching and slapping flippers on the water. The tall, 1.8 metre dorsal fin of the bull is also very recognisable.

The orca is the largest member of the dolphin family. The name killer whale was originally 'whale killer'—named by Spanish sailors who saw them hunt larger whales. Despite their fierce reputation, no records exist of deliberate fatal attacks on people. But it still pays to treat them with respect.

### **Occasional visitors**

#### *Humpback whale*

Humpback whales commute through Cook Strait each year, between summer feeding in Antarctic waters and winter breeding in the Pacific. Two were seen in Lyall Bay in 1999.



Humpback whale.

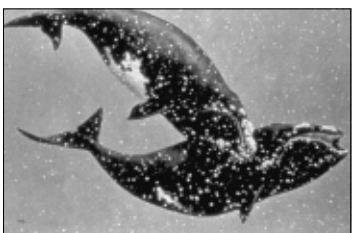
#### *Southern right whale*

Right whales also travel past. They once numbered 60,000. Today, after whaling, only a few thousand remain. One visited Wellington harbour in 1997.

#### *Sperm whale*

Some sperm whales hangout in Cook Strait all year round. They were once hunted for their oil to make medicines and candles. These days people visit them, at the southern end of Cook Strait, on whale-watching tours from Kaikoura.

The minke and long finned pilot whales and dusky and bottlenosed dolphins are also more likely to be spotted from boats than from shore.



Southern right whale.

### **Very rare visitors**

Five species of beaked whales have come ashore around Wellington—the Arnoux's, Cuvier's, Andrew's, Gray's and Hector's beaked whales. Other strandings include the straptooth, blue, pigmy right and pygmy sperm whales.

## ***What you should do***

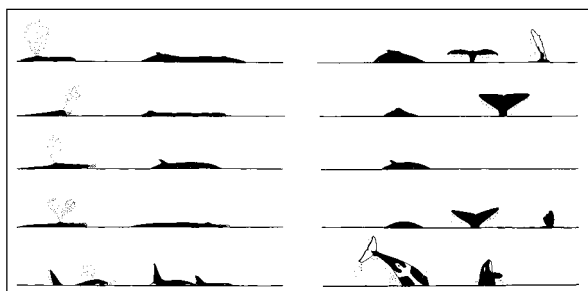
### **When you spot whales, orca or dolphins...**

- Stay at least 50 metres away; keep speed below 5 knots
- Don't chase them in a boat, kayak or jet ski
- Don't pass through a pod, cut off its path, it can be dangerous.
- Keep away from young animals. Parents may see you as a threat.

The Orca Project like to know when orca visit.  
Ring 0800 SEE ORCA

### **When you come across stranded animals...**

- Ring the Department of Conservation immediately.
- Keep the animals upright.
- Keep them cool and wet. Use wet sheets if you have them.



Identifying whales on the water:  
(top to bottom) blue whale,  
sperm whale humpback whale,  
right whale, orca.

*Don't cover the blowhole or pour water in it—the whale breathes through it.*

- Talk to them. It helps keep the animals calm.
- Don't tug or two on flippers or flukes. These are fragile and can tear off.
- Don't stay near an animal that is thrashing about—they are strong, and heavy, and you could be injured.



## ***Humans and whales—the threats***

### **Past**

- Humans have not been good to whales. Shore-based whaling stations operated in New Zealand from the mid-1820s. The modern whaling industry, using steam-powered chaser boats, began in 1910. But whaling in New Zealand's waters ended in 1964 and whales are coming back.
- New Zealand's most successful whaling operation was across Cook Strait, in Tory Channel. Each season the station harpooned 200 humpback whales. In 1900 the world's oceans held about 115,000 humpbacks; one century later there are fewer than 7,000.

### **Present**

Whaling may have largely ended, but we still take a big toll.

- We pollute whales' environment with rubbish and synthetic chemicals
- We change the marine ecosystem through global warming and ozone depletion.
- We run them over with our ships. (The skeleton of a 20-metre pygmy blue whale hanging in Te Papa Museum, Wellington, is from an animal that arrived at Auckland Harbour wrapped around the bow of a container ship).

### **How you can help**

- Fish bait bags and plastic bags often get eaten by whales and are cause death. Take your rubbish home with you.
- Things you pour down the plug or into the gutter end up in the oceans and in the food chain—so don't pour harmful chemicals down the drain.

## *The guardians*

The Marine Mammals Protection Act and Regulations legally protect whales and dolphins within New Zealand's 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ). These are administered by the Department of Conservation. In 1994 the Southern Ocean Whaling Sanctuary was created and includes New Zealand's entire EEZ south of 40 degrees south.

DOC manages whale strandings and rescues. With the help of Project Jonah and local communities and volunteers many stranded animals are successfully returned to the sea.

The Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa has been collecting information from strandings since 1895 and now maintains the database for DOC. More than 12,000 animals are recorded.

The migration stories of many iwi Maori feature whales. They were a taonga (treasure), and stranded animals provided a source of food, and the whalebone and teeth of some species highly prized for making implements, weapons and ornaments. Today DOC consults with local iwi over the recovery of the remains of dead stranded whales, returning whalebone and teeth for cultural purposes.

## *More information*

### **Kapiti Area**

10 Parata St  
P. O. Box 141  
WAIKANAE  
Tel: (04) 296 1112  
Fax: (04) 296 1115

### **Poneke Area**

2nd Floor  
Bowen State Building  
Bowen St, P. O. Box 5086  
WELLINGTON  
Tel: (04) 472 5821  
Fax: (04) 499 0077

### **Wairarapa Area**

South Rd  
P. O. Box 191  
MASTERTON  
Tel: (04) 377 0700  
Fax: (04) 377 2976

### **Other contacts**

- Project Jonah (NZ) Inc **HOTLINE (025) 941 772**.  
P.O. Box 8376, Symonds Street, Auckland
- Orca Project, 0800 SEE ORCA
- Adopt an Orca, P.O. Box 1233, Whangarei

### **Useful web sites**

- [www.zoom.whales.com](http://www.zoom.whales.com)
- [www.adopt-a-dolphin.com](http://www.adopt-a-dolphin.com)
- [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz)

### **Other reading**

Baker, Alan. 1990: *Whales and Dolphins of New Zealand and Australia*. Victoria University Press, Wellington.

Cherfas, Jeremy. 1989: *The Hunting of the Whale*. Penguin Books, Great Britain.

Ell, Sarah. 1995: *There She Blows - Sealing and Whaling Days in New Zealand*. Bush Press.

Morton, Harry. 1982: *The Whale's Wake*. University of Otago Press, Dunedin. 396 p.

Payne, Roger. 1995: *Among Whales*. Dell Publishing, New York.